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AUTHOR Stahler, Theresa M.
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ABSTRACT

Teaching at the middle level is different from any other teaching and so requires special preparation. Teachers in middle schools need special training to work with and be responsive to young adolescents need to interact with their peers and to use the peer group rather than the teacher for direction and guidance. The attempt to develop programs to prepare and certify teachers with this understanding and ability has been at the heart of the middle school movement. A study compared a group of middle level student teachers who were prepared in a middle school teacher education program with a group of middle level student teachers who were prepared in an elementary or a secondary teacher education program. These student teachers (N=34) completed a questionnaire about their attitudes toward middle level learners and middle level teaching. Results of analyses showed that the student teachers with special middle school preparation knew more about early adolescents, were familiar with the literature, prepared lesson plans that included more practices appropriate for middle level learners, taught more highly rated lessons, and had a better attitude toward middle level teaching than those who had been prepared in a more general program. Some of the conclusions are: (1) state certification requirements can hasten middle level teacher preparation; (2) there is a need for separate middle level teacher education programs built on the unique qualities and needs of young adolescents; and (3) leaders in teacher education must take the initiative in restructuring these programs. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the paper. (Contains 10 references.) (MAH)

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Middle Level Teaching - Developing an Attitude

As Pennsylvania ponders a certificate for middle school teachers and the number of states that have elevated middle school teaching to a separate unique status remains stagnant, there seems to be a need to remind those of us committed to middle school teaching of the reasons that teaching at the middle level is different from any other teaching.

The middle school movement has attempted to address the confusion and lack of knowledge concerning the preparation and certification needs of teachers for the middle level, but this movement is doomed to the same fate as its predecessor, the junior high school, unless institutions which prepare teachers are preparing teachers with the knowledge and skills to provide for the needs of the early adolescent. In the absence of properly prepared educators for these critical middle years, young adolescents are subjected to teaching approaches which are not developmentally appropriate for middle level learners. For many teachers prepared for secondary school, the emphasis on subject matter and passive learning creates an learning environment which is not responsive to the needs of the young adolescent. Many teachers prepared for elementary school are not equipped to deal with the need of the young adolescent to interact with his peers and to use the peer group rather than the teacher for direction and guidance. Adequate preparation of teachers for middle school has been called the most critical and long standing problem in American education (Alexander, 1991).

Many teachers of young adolescents dislike their work (Goodlad, 1984). The majority of teachers serving in the middle grades have not been appropriately prepared for working with young adolescents. Teacher education programs are not preparing middle level teachers to create a responsive educational climate for young people at this turning point in their lives. Assignment to a middle grade school is, all too frequently, the last choice of teachers who are prepared for elementary and secondary education (Turning Points, 1989). The variable, transitional nature of the young adolescent is often challenging to adults whose interests and

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dispositions fit more comfortably with younger children or older adolescents. If teachers are to support the reconceptualizing of middle level education, they must understand the nature of the young adolescent and demonstrate exemplary responsive instructional practices for this age group.

The attempt to develop programs to prepare and certify teachers with this understanding and ability has been at the heart of the middle school movement. Leaders in the middle school movement believe that it is essential to develop a cadre of teachers wholeheartedly committed to the philosophy of middle level education and possessing both the theoretical and practical knowledge for working with this age group (McEwin & Clay,1977; Scales,1992).

Teacher education's traditional elementary/secondary dichotomy ignores the education of the early adolescent, creating a void in teacher preparation. Teachers are less likely to choose to teach middle level learners than any other grade level (Sage, 1988). Teachers report difficulties with the age level or the desire to focus on subject matter as detractors to middle level teaching. Sixty one percent of middle school principals reported having not one teacher in their building with middle level preparation and when this preparation is reported, it is usually in the form of an inservice course (Epstein, 1988).

Historically, institutions which prepare teachers have been committed to the preparation of teachers for the existing schools of this country. A serious discrepancy exists between teacher preparation's commitment to education and teacher preparation's commitment to middle level education. Nationally, 33% of institutions which prepare teachers offer a middle level teacher preparation program (McEwin, 1990).

The Carnegie Council on Adolescence called middle level education "a powerful shaper of adolescents." Although potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, all too often a volatile mismatch exists between the organization, curriculum, and teachers of young adolescents (The College of Education Middle School Task Force, The Ohio State University, 1990). This mismatch occurs, in part, because institutions which prepare teachers are not preparing teachers ,

specifically, for the middle years.

Ten years ago, Judith Lipsitz, summarizing her study of four successful middle schools, offered, "One essential ingredient that is not always replicated but should be: teachers must want to be where they are" (1984, p.200). Lipsitz believes that middle level teachers must be committed to middle level teaching and must want to be where they are. Too many middle school teachers and preservice teachers dread the middle years and find themselves in a sixth, seventh or eighth grade because that is their only job opportunity.

Two recent studies support the importance of the middle level teacher's level of commitment. Connor surveyed, interviewed and shadowed 32 outstanding middle level teachers throughout the country. While each teacher demonstrated a unique style, each teacher attributed teaching success to "an attitude of commitment (Connor, 1992, p.48)." This characteristic emerged above all others in describing the outstanding teachers. When George and Stevenson (1989) solicited principals' views on what constituted the best teachers, the principals described these teachers as embodying "commitment, respect and understanding ... in their relationships with students (p.24)

McEwin & Thomason (1989) state that an essential characteristic of middle grades teachers is a cognizance of and acceptance of young adolescent behavior. Teachers who are unaware of or unable to accommodate early adolescent behavior can create tremendous barriers to educational change in the middle school. Teachers who have a thorough knowledge of the normal and expected behavior of their clientele make sound educational decisions concerning the balance between teacher-directed and student initiated activities.

The following study compared a group of middle level student teachers who were prepared in a middle school teacher education program with a group of middle level student teachers who were prepared in an elementary (K-8) or secondary (9-12) teacher education program. All of the student teachers in the study (N=34) would be certified for middle level

instruction and thus could be hired for a middle school position because the state in which they were certified did not require a separate middle level

certificate for middle school teaching. The study sought to determine which group of student teachers were better middle school student teachers when better teaching was defined by knowledge about middle school teaching and learning which the student teacher possessed, middle level teaching performance, lesson plans for middle level teaching , and attitude toward the middle level.

Results of analyses showed that the student teachers who chose middle level teaching and had been prepared in a program directed specifically at the middle level knew more about young adolescents and curriculum and instruction at the middle level, were familiar with the literature and research that surrounds the middle level, prepared lesson plans that included more practices appropriate for middle school learners, taught lessons that were rated more highly by middle school experts, and had a better attitude toward middle level teaching than teachers who had been prepared in a more general teacher education program which included but did not focus on the middle years. The student teachers who were prepared in a special middle level teaching program emerged as better middle level teachers in each area measured, but the area which showed the most significant difference was the area of attitude.

The middle school student teachers completed a survey in which they were asked questions about their attitude toward middle level learners and middle level teaching. This was a twelve part self report questionnaire which the student teachers answered by circling strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. Each of the middle school student teachers completed this survey both before and after student teaching.

Please answer the following questions by circling the most appropriate response.

1. I plan to teach at the middle level.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

2. While I would prefer to teach at the middle level, I will apply for any teaching position.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

3. I will accept only a middle level position.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

4. I am prepared to teach at the middle level.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

5. My field experiences have prepared me to teach at the middle level.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

6. My college courses have prepared me to teach at the middle level.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

7. My teacher preparation program has prepared me for middle level teaching.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

8. I understand young adolescents.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

9. I can implement teaching strategies appropriate to middle level learners.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

10. I understand the middle school philosophy.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

11. Teacher should be prepared, specifically, to teach at the middle school.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

12. I am familiar with the literature and publications produced by the National Middle School Association.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree

Results of the Study

Results of the univariate test measuring differences in the attitudes about middle level teaching between preservice teachers who have been prepared in a general teacher preparation program and preservice teachers who have been prepared in a specific teacher preparation program show a significant difference between the two groups both prior to beginning the student teaching experience and following the student teaching experience(Apendix A).

Attitude and commitment emerged as the outstanding difference between these teachers. Responses that appeared most divergent between the two groups were: commitment to middle level teaching with 100% of the specifically prepared teachers saying they strongly agreed with the statement, "I plan to teach at the middle level" and 100% of the generally prepared teachers either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. The idea of commitment emerged vividly from an examination of the responses to the attitude survey. Those preservice teachers who were prepared specifically for middle level teaching were unanimous in their strong agreement that they would "accept only a middle level position." Not one of the generally prepared preservice teachers made this strong statement; and only one of this group even agreed with this statement. If one believes, as does Joan Lipsitz, that middle level teachers must be committed to middle level teaching and must want to be where they are, then this declaration of commitment assumes even greater importance.

Twenty five percent of the generally prepared preservice teachers and 79% of the specifically prepared preservice teachers "strongly agreed" with the statement "I understand young adolescents." Early in the middle school movement, William Alexander pointed out that "it is the nature of the student...which differentiates teaching at the middle level from any other level" (Alexander, 1968, p.83). One study of middle school and junior high teachers reported that teachers with the greatest understanding of adolescent development preferred teaching at the middle level, while

teachers with the least understanding would prefer to teach at another level (Timmer, 1977). Teachers who understand young adolescent development are more likely to accept them for who they are. This acceptance is essential to middle level learners. Teachers who understand and accept middle school learners are an essential element of an effective middle school.

All of the specifically prepared student teachers reported that they planned to teach at the middle level, while only fifty percent of the generally prepared preservice teachers planned to teach at the middle level. The generally prepared preservice teachers had other levels with whom they had worked and with whom they felt comfortable teaching. They did not demonstrate the commitment to this level of teaching as powerfully as did the specifically prepared preservice teachers. If seventh and eighth grades are chosen last among teachers and if even those who student teach at the middle grades do not plan to teach in the middle grades, the likelihood of getting teachers at the middle level who really want to be there seems remote, especially if teacher preparation programs continue to prepare teachers generally.

The specifically prepared preservice teachers were in complete agreement that their college courses, field placements and their teacher preparation program had prepared them for middle level teaching. One hundred percent of the specialists believed that their teacher preparation program had prepared them for middle level teaching while seventy percent of the generalists disagreed that their teacher preparation program had prepared them for middle level teaching. This belief that one is prepared to teach empower teachers to be successful. The lack of preparation, likewise, reduces the teachers sense of ableness, the confidence in the ability to teach. This is a time of doubt for many middle level learners; the teacher must be less concerned with power and the teacher's own ego and more secure in the ability to teach and relate to learners.

McEwin and Thomason (1989) believe that middle grades teachers should have a strong self-concept. The middle grade teachers' responses to the attitude questionnaire indicate a strong professional self concept. They

believed that they were prepared to teach at the middle level (100%). They believed that their field experiences had prepared them to teach at the middle level (100%). They believed that their courses had prepared them to teach at the middle level(100%). They believed that their teacher preparation program had prepared them to teach at the middle level (100%). They believed that they understood young adolescents (100%). They believed that they could implement strategies appropriate to middle level learners (100%).

According to the Scales' study, 72% of the deans of colleges of education believed that middle grades teachers ought to be prepared differently than elementary or secondary teachers. Only 40% of middle grades teachers in the Scales' study agreed that middle grades teachers needed different preparation than elementary or secondary teachers. The thirty four preservice teachers in this study were in agreement, 100% of the specifically prepared "strongly agreed" and 85% of the generally prepared either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that teachers should be prepared, specifically, to teach at the middle level.

Each of the specifically prepared preservice teachers reported themselves familiar with the literature and publications of the National Middle School Association, while only 10% of the generally prepared preservice teachers agreed that they were familiar with this organization and its literature. If one considers that each of these preservice teachers taught at a school called a middle school, and the influence that the National Middle School Association has had on the history of the development of the middle school, it appears that the teacher preparation program has not sufficiently prepared the teacher for the teaching assignment. On both the level of professional knowledge and the level of curriculum and materials support, every teacher who is eligible for middle school teaching should be familiar with this organization and its publications. Four of specifically prepared preservice teachers found themselves in a school which was trying to implement some of the organizational practices and instructional strategies recommended by the National Middle School Association. The teachers at this school seemed to lack curriculum support. The preservice

teachers were able to make the Middle School Journal available to these teachers. The teachers in the middle school were appreciative of the resources that they then found available. Most of these teachers had been teaching before the middle school concept was defined or empirically researched. It is the role of the university to provide preservice teachers and, indirectly, local education agencies the current knowledge in education. By providing the local education agencies with preservice teachers who are not current in the educational theories and findings such as the middle school concept and related studies, the university is not honoring its commitment to local education agencies.

In placing the autumn quarter preservice teachers at local educational agencies, two out of the three principals in middle schools where specifically prepared student teachers had been placed responded that they would prefer only student teachers who were specifically prepared for the middle school. This was an unsolicited request. Those educational leaders in the middle schools were impressed by the ability of preservice teachers who were specifically prepared for this level of teaching.

Following graduation each of the specifically prepared student teachers who applied received a middle school position. One principal who called for a reference stated that he was hiring three of the teachers from this select group for his urban middle school. He stated that these teachers wanted to teach young adolescents. Their enthusiasm had secured a job, (along with their preparation and experience with middle level education).

Conclusions

A study by Peter Scales at the Center for Early Adolescence states that the first and second priorities for middle grade leaders is to make a more convincing empirical case for special preparation so that more preservice teachers want to enroll in special programs, and to help make a number of programs understand what it is that they must do to prepare teacher for the middle years (p. 9). Analyzing the differences between preservice teachers who have been enrolled in a special middle level teacher preparation program and preservice teachers who have been enrolled in a general

teacher preparation program; examining the differences between what they believe; and, describing a manner in which this preparation can successfully be carried out makes a convincing argument for specific middle level teachers.

The middle school movement is not temporary. No other school curriculum change in the history of education has been as extensive or sustained as long as the middle school movement (The College of Education Middle School Task Force, The Ohio State University, 1990). This movement is dependent on educators at the university and in the schools who are prepared for teaching at this level. This analysis demonstrates that colleges of education can prepare teachers who are prepared for teaching young adolescents and, most importantly, are committed to these learners.

State certification requirements can hasten middle level teacher preparation. For example. in 1981 only two of nine Kentucky teacher education institutions reported programs for middle level education. Following Kentucky's adoption of middle level certification in 1984, 13 out of 14 institutions reported having middle level teacher preparation programs (McEwin, 1988). I do not believe that middle level teacher certification should be the responsibility of the state, however. Institutions which prepare teachers must take leadership in preparing the best teachers for this nation's schools. This preparation must take into account what is known about learners and about instructional strategies. The middle school concept is not new. It is grounded on developmental theory and on descriptive studies of the components of effective middle schools and and the behaviors and competencies of effective middle school teachers. There are many unknowns in education but how to teach young adolescents is known. Institutions which prepare teachers cannot allow their own lethargy or adherence to tradition to prevent preservice teachers from learning appropriate middle level teaching practices. Those who study middle school literature and have spent time with young adolescents know that the middle years are separate and unique from the elementary and secondary years. The educational community at the university should not need the continual

prodding of classroom teachers to address the middle years.

A separate middle level teacher preparation program should exist which prepares teachers to work with learners during this critical time. The elementary teacher preparation program must focus on the breadth of content. This fails the middle level teacher who is most often teaching one or two subject areas and must have more depth of content. It is unfair to expect an elementary prepared preservice teacher to have the subject expertise that is required to teach middle level learners. While secondary prepared teachers have subject depth, their unwillingness and lack of preparation to deal with the non-academic needs of the young adolescent do no make them ideal for middle level teaching. It has been my experience that often secondary teachers have chosen this level of teaching because of their interest in the subject matter rather than the learner. The learner must be the primary consideration of the middle level teacher.

Institutions which prepare teachers must forge a new level of teacher preparation that is built on the unique qualities and needs of the young adolescent. The educational community knows through the research that there is a way to prepare teachers for working with young adolescents and yet institutions which prepare teachers are not utilizing this research to prepare teachers in the best way possible. It is the responsibility of institutions which prepare teachers to reconceptualize middle level education.

Leaders in teacher education must take the initiative in restructuring programs that prepare teachers to teach young adolescents. Teacher preparation programs must prepare preservice teachers who are responsive to the needs of young adolescents. Whether theses programs would be directed toward a K-4, 5-8, and 9-12 configuration,a K-4, 5-9, 9-12 configuration or a similar configuration is not the critical issue. What is critical is that the organizational pattern would provide specific preparation for the middle level. The teacher preparation program would include a thorough understanding of middle level learners, appropriate instructional and organizational practices for these learners, a content depth in at least two areas, and field placements that represent the best in middle school

practice. These components have been agreed upon by theorists and practitioners. This study has proven that these components enable a preservice teacher to appropriately teach middle level learners. These components teach the preservice middle school teacher how to teach at the middle level. If our middle level preservice teachers do not understand young adolescent development, can not implement instructional strategies responsive to this development, do not possess a knowledge of the middle school concept and have not experienced middle level learners in their preservice teacher preparation program field experiences, they are not prepared to be a middle level teachers.

This study demonstrates that when teachers are specifically prepared for middle level teaching through their course work, their field experiences, and their teaching models, they are better prepared for middle level teaching and more committed to working with young adolescents. Research on effective middle level schools indicates that teachers and administrators in these schools have a strong belief system that sets them apart from elementary and secondary teachers (Lipsitz, 1981). This analysis indicates that a specific teacher preparation program sets middle level preservice teachers apart from teachers generally prepared for the elementary or secondary school.

The middle years are a critical time in the development of the learner and it is equally critical that institutions which prepare teachers are providing these learners with teachers who understand them, want to teach them, and have been prepared to teach them. This is the duty of the teacher preparation program. Our attitude and commitment to middle level learners is reflected in the preparation that our teacher candidates receive.

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